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AUTHOR Grimes, Dorothy G.
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ABSTRACT

Although workshops and a study by the English Department of the University of Montevallo (Alabama) led to the conclusions that writing should be taught from a process model and that writing consciousness needed to be raised throughout the curriculum, these conclusions did not adequately address several issues: (1) process is a teaching philosophy, not just a teaching method; (2) deciding to teach process does not explain how process will actually be taught; (3) to be effective, the process method must be reinforced in other courses; and (4) the term "process" may itself be an oversimplification of the many complex processes involved in reading and writing. In order to follow up and clarify its previous findings, the English department needs to engage in professional reading on the writing process, to explore ways to help freshman composition students see writing as a means of learning in all their courses, to pay the expenses of a faculty member from the Beaver College NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) Institute to come to the university to show how principles can be transformed into practice, and to consider the possibilities of more research in composition. To fulfill its obligations to the larger community, the English Department should train teachers, provide leadership in the university for using writing in other disciplines, and establish closer ties with local secondary school writing teachers. (JL)

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THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, THE TEACHING OF WRITING, AND THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY: PARTICLE, WAVE, AND FIELD

Dorothy G. Grimes
University of Montevallo
Montevallo, Alabama
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In recalling those whose ideas and influence are reflected in this paper, I think first of members of my own department whose conversation always helps shape my judgments--people such as Elizabeth Rodgers, Norman McMillan, Sarah Palmer, and Tom Woods; members of my own University administration whose vision helped me get to Beaver--Russell Warren and John Lott; members of my own team, who quite literally helped me get here and who often helped me get some distance from my work--Martha Wall and Charles Majure; members of the Institute itself whose questions and comments often set me off on some unexplored connection; and, as the content of my text so obviously reveals, members of the Institute faculty--particularly Peggy Horodovich, Elaine Maimon, Jerry Belcher, and Barry O'Connor. I am especially grateful to Peggy Horodovich, who helped me synthesize a great deal about rhetoric and linguistics and who steered me through this particle of writing. All of these people I would prefer to call, simply, members of my life.

In any community of learners, the learner himself must take responsibility for misinterpreting advice, for accepting bad advice, or for ignoring good advice. I accept those responsibilities and claim the mistakes in this presentation as all my own.

THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, THE TEACHING OF WRITING, AND THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY: PARTICLE, WAVE, AND FIELD

Although I had read about Richard Young's heuristic procedure before coming to the Beaver College Institute, the terms which Richard Young and his collaborators, Alton Becker and Kenneth Pike, borrowed from physics--particle, wave, and field--and metaphorically applied to ways in which a writer may explore his topic never would have occurred to me as a way to describe a composition program. In their heuristic, Young, Becker, and Pike define these three possible perspectives in this way: (1)a particle perspective views the unit as a static entity, differing from things similar to it but nevertheless a part of a larger context; (2)a wave perspective views the unit as a dynamic entity which has a history and a future and which interacts with its environment; (3)a field perspective views the unit as an abstract system within a larger system.[1] As I dealt with the realities of marking papers, attending committee meetings, and preparing for the next day's classes, Young, Becker, and Pike's book sat quietly on my office bookshelf, and I thought in other metaphors. My favorite one was that of a composition program as a ball of wax. Although I had not worked out all the implications of that metaphor, I knew that it reflected my frustration in trying to reshape the program. The composition

program was a gooey, misshapen mass which could not be partitioned without being squashed; to change one part destroyed another part, and the more heat one applied the stickier it became.

Now some one thousand miles away from the papers, committees, and class preparations, I find the wax metaphor less forceful, primarily because after a little more consideration of Young, Becker, and Pike, I see that all of us who are involved in helping students learn to write better are ourselves a part of a dynamic process--what Richard Young would call a wave--and that what we view as wave can also be viewed as particle and field.

As a member of an English department and one trained primarily in literary criticism, I--and others like me--tend to take what Young would call the particle view: an English department is a static entity. Although William Riley Parker argues that "'English' has never really defined itself as a discipline,"[2] an English department in contrast to other departments has two obvious characteristics: (1)it is concerned primarily with literary studies (in English or in English translation) and secondarily with English language studies, and (2)it is responsible for teaching writing to college students, often once and for all in their freshman year. According to Parker, English departments have survived because of this second characteristic: "It was the teaching of freshman composition that quickly entrenched English departments

in the college and university structure--so much so that no one seemed to mind when professors of English, once freed from this slave labor, became as remote from everyday affairs as the classicists had ever been" (pp. 13-14).

In the case of my own English Department, this description is only partially accurate. Although members of the University of Montevallo English Department tend to "think departmentally" because to do so is one of the givens of our academic heritage, the split between composition instructors and literature instructors is simply nonexistent. In fact, each of the twelve full-time faculty members who make up the department teaches two composition classes per semester. Questions about the composition program are addressed democratically, first by the Freshman English Committee and then by the entire department. Outsiders looking at our curriculum often comment on the strong requirements which the Department and the University have retained: two semesters of composition and two semesters of sophomore literature (world literature in translation) are required for all students. Most teachers of the freshman course are accustomed to assigning about seven essays per semester to be written according to rhetorical models and graded analytically, primarily on the basis of organization and surface features. The second semester of the freshman composition course also includes a research paper project and an introduction to literary genres.

Yet a look backward at English departments and a look forward at such changes as writing across the curriculum

can make clear the need for a wave perspective--specifically the wave perspective suggested by the title of this colloquim, "Rediscovering the Essential." English departments were not always what they are today. Many early professors of English were also professors of history, language, mathmatics, philosophy, logic, rhetoric, or oratory (Parker, p. 12). Today we may need to ask ourselves whether those well-established courses such as those I described are serving the student as well as they should.

In my own university of some 3,000 students, the English Department began last year to ask that question. The Department undertook a self-study of its composition program. Two faculty development workshops--one in March and one in May 1982--were funded by institutional faculty development funds. The March workshop was done by a consultant from a nearby major university. The Freshman English Committee (who submitted the original faculty development proposal) asked him to study our program before he came--especially in light of a set of questions which the Freshman English Committee has prepared for him--and to help the Department establish priorities for study and change. Two of his major recommendations were (1)"commitment to a process model of teaching in regular freshman composition courses" and (2)"commitment to more writing and writing consciousness throughout the English curriculum and cooperation with other areas for writing across the curriculum."

In light of these two recommendations, two major directions of study were set. The May workshop was conducted by the

Freshman English Committee as a seminar on rhetorical theory and the teaching of writing as process, and with the support of the Core Curriculum Committee, a team applied for the Beaver College Institute. The May workshop on rhetorical theory and the composing process was quite successful, and although I felt some follow-up was necessary, perhaps on evaluating student writing, I assumed that I would now turn to writing across the curriculum--something related to our earlier concerns but nevertheless separate from it.

Now, however, I have discovered that the English Department's study of writing as process was probably inadequate on several counts:

1. One must be careful in the use of the term process. It does not merely refer to a teaching method or a shift of emphasis in present practice. It does not refer simply to a way of allowing the student more drafts to correct his mistakes. Rather it refers to a teaching philosophy, to the way one perceives education. To teach by process is to structure assignments in such a way that the student writes to learn.
2. Saying that composition will be taught by a process model does not mean that it will be. One must know how to teach that way, especially how to construct effective assignments, how to structure peer review, and how to comment on drafts.

3. When one realizes that to teach by process is to actively involve students in learning, he also realizes that he will have accomplished little if the method is not reinforced in other courses. The goals of helping the student acquire knowledge and that of helping him acquire a method of gaining knowledge (a skill) are complementary, not opposing. Involving students in writing is, in Peggy Horodovich's phrase, a way to "cure passive learning."[3]
4. The term process may itself be misleading. As Maimon et al. have pointed out, "Writing is not a process, but a series of processes."[4] Many of these processes are parts of acquiring knowledge and thus cannot be taught as skills in a vacuum. In order to write or to learn, a student must be able to represent material to himself (p. 18), to perceive relationships, to impose meaning, and to make assertions (p. 47). Writing in this context becomes not merely a means to an end, a process which one must go through in order to arrive at a text that communicates something to a reader. It becomes, at any point on the continuum from private to public writing, a means of acquiring knowledge. In this way it is closely related to reading. Although we usually think of reading as antecedent to writing, for we learn to read before we learn to write, writing may actually be a way to make better readers.[5] Harriet Sheridan of Brown

> University described the recent change in theories about reading as "a movement away from behaviorists' theory that presumes that skills are acquired by repetition and reinforcement to a theory that recognizes relationships between skills and knowledge." Suggesting that all good writing should "display the coursing of a mind after an idea," she argues that "in all fields reading and writing must be connected and must be constant."[6]

It seems clear, then, that the English Department needs to follow up and to clarify its previous study. The following ways seem appropriate:

1. The English Department should use the fall semester 1982 as a period of professional reading, especially concentrating on reading which deals with the implications of viewing writing as a process--materials on constructing assignments, encouraging collaborative learning, and implementing peer review. Elaine Maimon argues that "one principle informs faculty development everywhere: Curricular change must be based on scholarly exchange."[7] The Chairman of the English Department has already agreed to spend a portion of the weekly English faculty meetings on faculty development aimed at composition. More than anything else, I would like for the English faculty to see the rationale behind the following statements about writing, statements which should guide the planning and teaching of freshman composition:

(1)A written discourse reflects a complex set of recursive processes, processes not always clearly distinct from those of thinking, reading, speaking, and listening. Nevertheless, writing is not such a mysterious, intuitive process that it cannot be taught. It can be taught both as a way of discovering meaning (often in quite specific and analyzable ways) and as a way of communicating meaning. Such teaching should account for both the assertion that "the act of writing is a complex cognitive skill, not a body of knowledge"[8] and the assertion that "acquiring knowledge is of value in itself, not simply learning how to learn" (Sheridan, Lecture, Beaver College, July 14, 1982).

(2)Purpose and audience are the primary shaping factors in discourse. Thus private writing is unlike public writing, and public writing varies according to the purpose and audience.

(3)Awareness of purpose and audience implies more than just establishing what the purpose of a discourse is and who the audience is. It implies imagining the audience[9] and following the conventions of discourse established by the audience's experiences and expectations.

(4)Skills cannot be meaningfully applied apart from a body of knowledge, knowledge not merely imposed by the experience of the English instructor but rather

knowledge based on the student's larger academic experience.

(5)An environment of collaborative learning and peer review is pedagogically sound and logistically essential if students are to learn how to form judgments and teachers are to be able to do more than simply grade papers or give empty assignments.

(6)Public writing follows the conventions of spelling, punctuation, and usage. Such conventions must be taught, not because they make good writing, but because they help insure clarity and establish credibility with a public audience.

2. The English Department should explore ways to make freshman composition a course which encourages the student to see writing as a means of learning in all his courses and which allows him to learn to write papers for his peers and teachers in other courses. In spring semester 1983, I would like to carry out a pilot program in course clustering similar to that at Beaver College. Fall semester would be spend preparing for this course, and I would try to insure that the other course with which my English 102 section was clustered was a course to be represented in one form or another in the core curriculum. Some form of compensation would be requested from the University for non-English faculty working on the course cluster, especially since they would be requested to attend

faculty development sessions with the English Department and to seriously explore how they could use writing assignments to structure learning experiences in their classes. The instructors involved in such course clustering should also be members of the University Writing Committee (to be described later).

3. In order to help the English Department toward a second kind of knowledge--the know how--to effectively carry out a writing program based on the principles outlined above, the University should (near the beginning of spring semester) pay expenses for a member of the Beaver College NEH Institute faculty to visit the University. The team member's visit would not be focused primarily on the English Department, but the English Department might especially profit from a session aimed at applying the reading which the group did during the fall semester--primarily work on structuring assignments and peer review. The Institute faculty member might spend the afternoon of the first day with the English Department and those people already directly involved in the writing program. The second day might be for a group of primarily non-English faculty, and the third day for Shelby County secondary English teachers. The English faculty who participated in the first day's workshop would be responsible for a follow-up "in house" workshop with the University faculty on the third day while the secondary English workshop was being held.

4. The English Department should consider the possibilities of more research in composition--either theoretical or pedagogical. The question of whether English in general or composition in particular will ever define itself as a discipline seems irrelevant. Perhaps the very lack of such clearly defined sets of principles makes us more able to "rediscover the essential." Much of the research in composition is being done by cognitive psychologists, but as a person in an English department, I do not find this fact bothersome The interest of the cognitive psychologist merely demonstrates the centrality of writing to the whole academic enterprise. Possibilities for research are not limited to the psychologists, however. No one is in a better position than the English instructor to follow changes which occur in student writing throughout a semester. Research--perhaps even collaborative research with members of other departments--is a logical step toward evaluating change in curriculum and teaching method.

These suggestions for improving the composition program are directed to the English Department as a changing entity--a wave. But the English Department does not change autonomously; it can be viewed as a field--a system within a larger system, the academic community. Within that community, its connections come about not only through freshman composition, but also in supportive connections with other departments of the University and with secondary schools in the area. One responsibility of the English Department to both the University and to the area schools is the

training of teachers. Another is providing leadership within the University for using writing in other disciplines. A third responsibility is establishing closer working ties with the writing instructors in the secondary schools. The following steps are possibilities for achieving these ends:

1. The English Department should institute a course in rhetoric and composition at the junior level. This course should be required of all peer tutors in the composition lab and of all English majors. The Department should also consider a similar graduate course.
2. The Academic Vice President should appoint a University Writing Committee made up of representatives from the various disciplines. The two University members of the Beaver College team and the non-English instructors working on the course clustering project should be included as voting members. The Shelby County member of the Beaver College team should be a non-voting member. The primary purpose of the committee, at least initially, would be to develop a faculty forum on writing and to recommend ways of restructuring the writing program. The committee would also address the need for making courses other than the freshman composition course writing reinforcement courses.
3. The members of the Beaver team will ask their administrators to cooperate in forming an Advisory Committee for Cooperation in Improving Writing Instruction.

The primary purpose of this committee would be to insure that the University and the Shelby County schools continue to work together after the Beaver College Institute. The committee would assist the members of the Beaver team in finding better ways for mutual support of writing programs, such as teacher exchanges, exchanges of papers, visits of high school seniors to University writing classes, and visits of college freshmen to high school English classes. The committee would also assist in planning and carrying out cooperative faculty development programs on writing.

My presentation may seem like little more than a series of lists and requests for committees. A camel may be a horse created by a committee, but if so, the committee did not know much about collaborative learning. I prefer to call my presentation a call for collaborative learning.

NOTES

[1]Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), p. 127.

[2]William Riley Parker, "Where Do English Departments Come From?" in The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, ed. Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 15. The subject of the relationship between English Departments and the teaching of rhetoric is also treated in a number of essays in a recent MLA collection--The Rhetorical Tradition and Modern Writing, ed. James J. Murphy (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1982).

[3]Peggy Horodovich, Class lecture, July 15, 1982.

[4]Elaine Maimon et al., Writing in the Arts and Sciences (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1981), p. 47.

[5]Barry O'Connor, Class lecture.

[6]Harriet Sheridan, "The Desert of Libya: The Profession of Literacy," Lecture, July 14, 1982.

[7]Elaine Maimon, Lecture, July 16, 1982.

[8]Linda S. Flower and John R. Hayes, "Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process," College English, 39 (Dec. 1977), 450.

[9]See Walter J. Ong, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," PMLA, January 1975, 9-21.